

# Denial in Alcoholism

## **Level 1: "No Problem"**

The person at this level denies any emotional or family problems. He may report that he is here as a requirement of probation or other influencing factors. He has no commitment to change because of his view that nothing is wrong. He feels, therefore, no willingness to cooperate in treatment. This person may be defensive or confused by the focus on alcohol and does not bring up the issue of alcohol spontaneity. If asked, he reports that the alcohol is easily controlled and may be fun. He believes that the alcohol is definitely not affecting his family. He may report choosing to refrain from drinking (or quitting) for various reasons. In either case, the person has nothing to talk about. The therapist may feel as if he has nothing to treat.

## **Level 2: "A Problem ?"**

The person at this level still actively denies that alcohol is the problem. He may spontaneously report having a problem such as nerves, depression, children, health, or money. He may feel misunderstood if his "problem" is not attended to and may feel maligned if alcoholism is the focus. On the other hand, this person may express some concern about the possibility that drinking may become an issue. He indicates a willingness to cooperate in the treatment process.

## **Level 3: "Alcohol Is a Problem"**

The person at this level agrees that alcohol contributes to life difficulties. His conviction, however, is that these difficulties are controllable. Drinking is seen as a reaction to and a way of coping with life stress. Gaining control over these difficulties will control the drinking. There is no belief or genuine understanding that alcoholism is the primary problem, a disease, autonomous or progressive. The loss of control over drinking, if present, is denied too. This person believes that an alcoholic is someone who drinks more than this person does. The person may become defensive if the interviewer focuses on alcoholism.

## **Level IV: "Sobriety May Help but Can I Control It"**

The person at this level accepts the idea of having a major problem with alcohol and may even call himself an alcoholic. However, this person denies being out of control and thus continues to try to "control" the drinking. This may be expressed in attempts (successful or not) to limit the drinking or in behaviour that denies the wish to drink, i.e., sipping drinks and asking for approval of the control. This person may also report being an alcoholic in the past, but not now. There is some recognition that things were out of control in the past. If this person has stopped drinking he may display little or no affect when discussing his recent sobriety. The erratic nature of the disease is perplexing and confusing, but there is no urgency to stop as in Level V.

### **Level V: "Sobriety Will Help"**

This person recognizes that his drinking is out of control and that his life is out of control due to drinking. There is conscious anxiety and guilt or shame about the loss of control. The focus of the effects can be the out-of-control drinking or he may be recently sober and may be concerned about losing family or job, going to jail, or going insane. The focus for this person is on the overwhelming realization of loss of control rather than what to do about it. There is the belief that the drinking is too much to control by himself. This person turns to the therapist seeking control. He appears committed to change. Alcoholism is seen as an illness, but the numerous implications are not yet appreciated.

### **Level VI: "Sobriety is Easy"**

The person at Level VI has a solid commitment to sobriety. The anxiety of the previous level is absent. Some people at this level feel great and this phenomenon has been described as the honeymoon phase of recovery. However, other people may feel miserable. The salient feature is the belief that he can do it all himself. Recovery is seen only as not drinking, minimizing the degree to which life has become entwined with alcohol. Consequently, this person may minimize the number of changes which must occur to stay sober and to begin to rebuild his life (family, job, friends, etc.).

### **Level VII: "Sobriety is Difficult"**

The person at this level again experiences anxiety, but this time the anxiety is about reconstructing his whole life and making amends, like saving a career or a marriage. This person realizes his own role in carrying this out and seeks reassurance and support for the struggle, rather than asking the therapist to do it for him. The person is not yet interested in exploring his past or present for deeper psychological meaning. The focus is often on exercising control, problem solving, social skills, and making amends.

### **Level VIII: "Life is Difficult"**

This person has gained confidence that life can be controlled without alcohol and now appreciates some of the subtle dilemmas of existence and seeks an age-appropriate maturity. This person often experiences limitations of personality style and desires to explore them. Self-exploration begins spontaneously here because the alcoholic can control effects enough to talk about his behaviour and thoughts, looking at fear, shame, guilt, anger, etc. This person is definitely connected to his self-image as an alcoholic and knows how easy it would be to fall back to drinking but is not threatened by this knowledge. This person has probably been sober a year or more and almost definitely belongs to, and regularly attends, one or more mutual help groups.